

A Problem of Communication: Keir Starmer's Labour Leadership

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"A Problem of Communication: Keir Starmer's Labour Leadership Keir Starmer was hailed as the leader who could bring Labour back to power. But with his polls – and his party's – flatlining, Andrew Roe-Crines asks what Sir Keir needs to do turn Labour's fortunes around."

In the autumn of 2021, the BBC broadcast *Blair & Brown: the New Labour Revolution*. The five-part series was well-received on British political Twitter, and especially by many former new Labour stalwarts. And with good reason: the show leaned into one of the Labour Party's greatest pastimes – focusing on the past as a way of reminding itself of old victories. This isn't necessarily a negative trait. Looking back at the past can help to showcase Labour values and remind the party and the wider electorate that the moral egalitarian mission that underscores the Labour Party remains a long-standing campaign. This romanticism, however, belies some of the realities Labour faces, in particular the party leadership.

In the broadest terms, Labour is splintered between two generalisable tendencies that can broadly be described as 'Corbynite' and 'New Labour/Centrist'. Since 2015, the Labour Party has been all but transformed by the infusion of a rank-and-file membership who now hold deeply held left-wing values, alongside a Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) that has within its ranks MPs elected under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn. Those who joined the Labour Party during Corbyn's 2015 leadership, and many of those MPs first elected in 2017 and again in 2019, remain deeply loyal to Corbyn's values. For them, Corbynism is more than simply a political project, rather it is a moral crusade to transform the Labour Party and with it the broader left, into an activist-led protest movement designed to showcase values over government policy and their implementation through a Labour administration. The New Labour/Centrist factions within the party continue to also prescribe remedies to Labour's polling woes which appear to disregard the changed nature of the party. Indeed, for the New Labour faction, the party can repeat the processes used against Militant Tendency under Kinnock, Smith and Blair, with the view to recapture the heart and soul of the membership. The problem with this is that the New Labour is no longer in the dominant position it was, nor does it enjoy the same modernisation strategy and policy renewal process initiated by Kinnock. Indeed, for the New Labour faction today, their prescriptions relate simply to surface appearance rather than genuine ideological change, thereby denying the realities facing Sir Keir Starmer as the current Labour leader.

Starmer's Challenges

Starmer, then, is at the centre of the two factions, each vying to control the post-Corbyn renewal strategy. The New Labour faction is boosted by the unchallenged belief that they have the solutions to Labour's problems in 2021, whilst the Corbynite tendencies remain committed to the idea that Labour's 2017/19 policies were only rejected at the ballot-box because the focus of the electorate was on Brexit. The New Labour faction believe their approach towards the hard left in the 1990s can be simply repeated as a way of positioning Labour on a route back to power. The issue with this, however, is that those they wish to confront have held leadership positions in a way their adversaries in the 1980s had not. Tony Benn had never been leader or deputy, yet Corbyn today carries the credibility of a former leader with all the supportive benefits that brings. Consequently, both factions believe their analysis of Labour's route back to power to be self-evidently correct, despite both having lost elections since 2010. As such, the problems facing Starmer are deep and require a wholesale re-

evaluation of the relevance of social democracy for the 2020s. This is a similar problem faced by Harold Wilson in 1963, when facing a divided party. His solution was to articulate a new vision of scientific socialism that highlighted the importance of looking forward, not back. At the time of delivery, Wilson's 'White Heat' speech sought to put the case forward for socialism in the technological age, in which the values and principles of the industrial skilled working classes could be transferred onto education, investment in the sciences, and modern infrastructure. By doing so, Wilson was able to put forward a case for socialism that looked forward, not back. For Starmer, the problem of the factional tendencies requires a similar renewal of social democracy by rejecting the solutions presented by both New Labour and the Corbynites, and instead to form new solutions to the problems facing society. Put simply, neither the New Labour nor the Corbynite wings hold the solutions that Starmer needs in order to unify the Labour Party behind a new conception of collective ownership linked to the values and principles of social democracy. However, a key problem facing Starmer is his own style of leadership, which has already courted a degree of controversy. Arguably, Starmer has been hesitant about showcasing his progressive and social democratic values to the Labour movement and beyond. For example, he appeared to have difficulty in declaring a position defending human rights concerning the Saudi takeover of Newcastle United. He argued that it was 'not for me as the leader of the opposition to say who should own which football club' despite calls on him to make a clear statement opposing the takeover as a values-based declaration on LGBTQ+ and wider human rights. Amnesty International had criticised the takeover, saying 'this will be an extremely bitter blow for human rights defenders and others suffering persecution in Saudi Arabia who will be well aware that this takeover is partly about diverting attention from their plight'. Had Starmer been more vocal in his criticism, then it would have afforded him an opportunity to be clearer on his values and how these align to progressive sentiments. Further values-based issues which Starmer has faced pertain to the decision to remove the Whip from Jeremy Corbyn; the decision to try and sack his deputy leader, Angela Rayner; and the moves to go beyond Corbynism without seeking to bring his or Corbyn's supporters with him. The reasons these are deeply problematic issues is that Corbyn remains a hugely popular figure within a substantial membership of the party, and also within a small yet vocal faction of the PLP. Removing the Whip from the former leader sends a message that Starmer would prefer confrontation over unity, which whilst his supporters may feel would be justifiable, makes the job of renewing the Labour Party (and with it positioning Labour on a trajectory towards power) problematic. Moreover, it affords Corbyn a position of moral authority as he is able to demonstrate that the leader is not interested in unity, and would prefer conflict, thereby energising his supporters to attack the party. Second, the decision to try and sack Rayner is problematic, not simply because of the optics of targeting his own deputy, but also because she drew support for her deputy leadership from a wider ideological spread of parliamentarians. Whilst Starmer was able to secure a clear mandate for the leadership, his is gifted only by those ideologically sympathetic towards either New Labour, or those with a 'Corbyn-hostile' profile. In contrast, Rayner was able to secure nomination preferences from across the party. Consequently, when Starmer attempted to dismiss her, he aggravated many within his party, and reduced the prospect of securing unity. This sends the message that he is not seeking to unify the party, rather he appears more interested in attacking his ideological opponents.

Starmer's Solutions?

So, what is to be done? How can Starmer re-position the Labour Party towards victory. Put simply, Starmer needs to outline why he wants to be the Labour leader, and why he wants to be Prime Minister. At present, these points are unclear thereby acting as barriers towards communicating his messages. Traditionally, Labour leaders come from a position of wanting to transform the country around a clearly outlined set of values that are informed by their backgrounds and their own

justifications for social democracy. In 2012, Ed Miliband was able to achieve this during his party conference speech by talking extensively about his family, how he came to the UK, and why his lived experiences led him towards joining Labour. At present, Starmer has yet to communicate a similar story or explain how he became a social democrat; how his values were fostered; or demonstrate how those values reflect those of the Labour membership; and how they motivate him to want to create a more egalitarian society. Indeed, one of the key elements of effective political communication is a leader's ability to show an audience that their values are also their own. Starmer has yet to do this, but by doing so, he would be in a better position to try and appeal to the wider set of voters that he needs, particularly if he can show how his values are shared across the country through a particular interpretation of national and social identity. Once he has explained his background and in so doing justified his leadership, Starmer then needs to seek the 'permission' of the electorate to be heard. At present, the voters are simply not listening to Labour because they are seen as distant and/or 'otherworldly'. There is also a sense in some parts of the country that Labour simply doesn't like or respect the voters. This perception can be overcome by demonstrating an understanding of the problems facing the country. This is not done by telling voters what their problems are before prescribing a solution without listening to the electorate in advance. Rather, it is about empathising with the problems facing millions in the country today on issues such as job security, the housing crisis, the cost of living and social welfare. To do this, Labour also needs to devise a new method of communicating with voters that eschews the old lines of the New Labour era. For example, the tried and tested '24 hours to save the NHS' has been used since 1997, yet continues to feature as part of Labour's campaign despite it now being 2021 and the NHS remaining a major part of society. Rather, Labour's new messages need to be relevant to voters' interests whilst simultaneously connected to a defence of social democracy for the 2020s. Central to Starmer's renewal strategy should be the question 'what do voters care about today?' The many answers to that question can inform their proposals for government, and demonstrate the ongoing relevance of social democracy, alongside a relevant renewal agenda. As with Wilson, Labour needs to confine the debates and factionalisms over New Labour and Corbynism within the history books, and instead look forward to explaining why social democracy has the answers for the modern post-COVID, post-Brexit world. If Starmer is unable to do this, then the Labour Party may risk electoral defeat again at the next general election. To avoid this, they also need to have an election strategy to take on the Conservatives that goes beyond the old and familiar arguments of 2010, 2015, 2017, and 2019. Importantly, however, in this Labour has an upper hand because Boris Johnson's style of campaigning (effective as seen in London and 2019) has become a known and practiced commodity that Labour's campaigning teams can plan for when the election campaign begins. Put simply, Johnson has shown Labour how he campaigns. Moreover, the Conservatives have yet to see Starmer's election style, thereby gifting Labour an advantage. Also, the Conservatives have now been in office for 12 years, and so will be starting to suffer the inevitable effects of long-term 'governing degeneration' which impacts any party that has been in government for a lengthy period. As such, Labour could be in a similar position to 1992 in which they can deprive the Conservatives of their majority. The question is, however, can they can push the Conservatives out of office?

Labour renewal

Labour needs to renew in order to move on from both New Labour and the Corbyn period, which have both been rejected by voters at the ballot box. Regardless of the internal party dynamics, to appeal to those voters who backed the Conservatives in 2019, Labour needs to be relevant to those voters. By doing so, Labour will be in a stronger position to make an electoral challenge. At present, however, Starmer has demonstrated his inability to unify the party behind his leadership, and nor has he made a significant polling impact with voters. There remains time, but he needs to begin crafting

his character for the voters to see who he is and why they should support him, and also develop a political narrative towards victory if Labour is to have a chance at the next election. If Labour is able to renew and if Starmer is able to lead, then it may be possible for the 2020s to become a social democratic decade – however, the current trajectory is one towards division, factionalism, and (if history is to be repeated) defeats.

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